

# **Arendtian Principles**

## **Abstract:**

This article addresses the crucial role political principles play in Arendt's account of political action and judgment. It proposes a new interpretive framework for understanding their political logic and the varied contexts within which they appear in Arendt's work. Principles can be understood according to three distinct perspectives from which they inspire, guide and organise political action. Reading Montesquieu alongside Kant, Arendt claims that principles operate according to a logic of exemplarity. Political action carries within itself and exemplifies a more general principle, which nevertheless cannot be determined as a rule. It does not establish a universal law according to which future action could be determined, but it does attempt to embody and exemplify a more general standard against which future action could be judged. Arendt argues that attending to the importance of principles in politics offers new possibilities for returning to the past and transforming contemporary practices.

**Key Words:** Arendt, principles, Montesquieu, Kant, action

## **Introduction**

Arendt celebrates the abyssal nature of human action – its ability to make radical ruptures with the past and to initiate new political beginnings. But despite the numerous interpretations and analyses of Arendt's account of political action, a crucial dimension has remained vague and undefined: how could it be said that action both 'springs from' and is 'guided by' something Arendt calls a principle? Furthermore, Arendt (1968, p. 152) claims that although this principle lies at the origin of political action as its inspiration and source, it 'becomes fully manifested only in the performing act itself'. To add to the complexity, Arendt (2006, p. 205; 1968, p. 152) appears to vacillate on the location of these principles, arguing first that a political action 'carries its own principle within itself', yet at another point claiming that principles 'inspire ... from without'. A re-examination of this material reveals that one of Arendt's most novel and important innovations is her conception of

immanent principles that inspire, guide and organise political action.<sup>1</sup> This idea has not received sufficient attention in the secondary literature. Arendt develops her own understanding of political principles from Montesquieu's distinction between different forms of government and their animating principles. While a form of government for Montesquieu describes its nature and constitutive structure, it is a principle that animates it and inspires the actions of both the government and its citizens, actions whose positive effects cannot be explained through the merely negative boundaries of the law. Her remarks on principles, scattered through a number of her books and essays, are elliptical, all too brief, and are at times even mysterious. Of those who have attempted to explain this aspect of her work the temptation has been to either declare it incoherent or interpret it through the lens of other theorists that are foreign to Arendt's thought.<sup>2</sup> As a result, particular interpretive difficulties are ignored or glided over. This oversight is unfortunate because Arendt (1968, p. 152) implies that a proper understanding of principles is essential to her theory of political freedom and human action.<sup>3</sup> Indeed, political principles appear at numerous decisive points in Arendt's work and could be described as one of her central political concepts.<sup>4</sup> There is evidence that this lacuna in the interpretation of her work is beginning to be addressed.<sup>5</sup> However, recent attempts at explicating Arendt's concept have failed to perceive the multi-faceted nature of political principles or reveal the political logic that underpins them. This article aims to clarify Arendt's conception of principles. It does so by viewing political principles from different perspectives and thereby gaining a richer and more complex view of the concept itself.

Arendtian principles contain three partially overlapping dimensions, which are provided with different weighting depending on the context in which they arise in her work. In ‘What is Freedom?’ Arendt emphasises the *originary* power of principles, their ability to inspire and generate free political action that is unconstrained by a prior system of moral standards. In this context, principles ensure the spontaneous and non-determined nature of action by distinguishing it from the means-ends character of a pre-determined motive and dictating will. In *On Revolution*, however, Arendt highlights the *guiding* power of principles, an internal ground of judgment and normative element that arises through the performance of the act.<sup>6</sup> This standard guards against the arbitrariness and potential boundlessness of action and prevents a self-defeating pursuit of an absolute beginning upon which to base it. In the essays collected in *The Promise of Politics*, Arendt illustrates the *organising* power of principles, their embodiment in the institutions and practices of a political community based on a shared fundamental experience and set of political convictions.<sup>7</sup> This tripartite distinction does not presume that the remaining two aspects are absent from Arendt’s discussion of political principles in each text. Rather, her analysis places emphasis on particular characteristics of the concept depending on the context and perspective. The way in which different aspects of the concept appear and recede when viewed from distinct angles reflects the perspectival nature of political deliberation and judgment and the way in which the world appears from the standpoint of plural human beings.

This article begins with an analysis of the three partially overlapping dimensions of Arendt’s principles. In the next section, it clarifies the relationship between political action and principles by examining the collective nature of political action and

Arendt's attempt at eschewing the relationship between a universal and a particular. It argues that the full meaning and significance of a political principle can only be known after the act, resulting from the deliberation and interpretation of a political community. I then turn to the logic of Arendt's political principles and argue that it is based on her idiosyncratic reading of Kant's third Critique. Principles provide a potential ground of judgment for assessing political action against a standard that is produced by the performance of the action itself. This formulation is Arendt's attempt to find a third option between the positions of mere subjective preferences and objective universal validity. Finally, I discuss the transformative potential of Arendtian principles insofar as they are able to open up new relationships with the past and enable future political transformations.

### **Three Perspectives on Arendt's Principles**

The original source of Arendt's conception of political principles is Montesquieu (2002 [1748], bk. III), who defines a principle as 'that by which a government is made to act' and 'the human passions that set it in motion'. Drawing from Montesquieu, the first important aspect of Arendtian principles is their capacity to 'inspire' or 'inspirit' action. Arendt (2007, pp. 196, 65) describes principles as the 'source' and the 'wellspring' of action, since principles 'inspire the actions of both rulers and ruled'. Action does not necessarily take part in a determined and rule-bound causal series since it has the capacity to start something new and connect with a new principle. Human beings are capable of new beginnings because action can be inspired by new principles and begin unpredicted chains of events. In this sense,

principles sustain human beings' capacity for radical novelty by providing a spontaneous and undetermined point of departure for action. A difficulty that arises in the interpretation of this position is that Arendt makes it clear that she does not wish to equate principles with the subjective psychological motives that cause individual human agents to act. How could a principle be both that which inspires action and yet still somehow be distinguished from psychological motives? It appears absurd that a principle could be simultaneously 'never the direct cause of action' but 'nevertheless what first sets it into motion' (Arendt, 2007, p. 194). Arendt's argument relies on a distinction that she establishes in 'What is Freedom?' between an action's principles and its motives and goals.<sup>8</sup> Her analysis of this correlation is essential to a proper understanding of her conception of principles. The relationship between the three is explained by Arendt as follows:

Principles do not operate from within the self as motives do ... but inspire, as it were, from without; and they are much too general to prescribe particular goals, although every particular aim can be judged in the light of its principle once the act has been started ... In distinction from its goal, the principle of an action can be repeated time and again, it is inexhaustible, and in distinction from its motive, the validity of a principle is universal, it is not bound to any particular person or to any particular group (Arendt, 1968, p. 152).

When Arendt states that principles can 'inspire' action she is not referring to an agent's empirical desires and motivations. An agent's motives are a private affair and in certain respects are of limited significance to the public realm. Arendt (2006, pp. 87–8) states that an act 'makes manifest its principle, [but] does not reveal the innermost motivation of the agent'. Principles, for Arendt, are not purely subjective motives, but rather, public grounds of justification for the act. To say that an agent is

‘inspired’ to act is not to make a claim about the actual subjective motives of the agent but to refer to the norms and reasons according to which such action could be justified. There is an overriding public dimension to these grounds because they cannot rest on merely contingent or arbitrary motives. Arendt (1992b, pp. 41–4) believes that an actor should be able to give an account of their actions and to say how they came to hold their position and why they acted in the way they did. In this respect, Arendt distances herself from Montesquieu’s subjective and psychological language of ‘*les passions humaines*’.

In opposition to the private existence of motives, principles have an inter-subjective dimension that allows them to be deliberated on in the public realm. Arendt (2007, p. 195) argues that ‘in psychological terms’, political principles could be described as the ‘fundamental convictions that a group of people share’. The reference to psychology is confusing here because Arendt is elsewhere clear that principles should not be understood in terms of an individual’s psychological motivations.<sup>9</sup> However, the appeal to ‘fundamental convictions’ can be viewed as referring to the shared political values of a community, rather than the particular motives of an individual. A community’s political values will ‘inspire’ in Arendt’s sense of the term insofar as they represent the deep-seated and habitual political orientation in the world from which agents are accustomed to acting. This is based on Arendt’s belief that it is not the negative boundaries of the law but the positive values of a community that will be the source of political action.

Furthermore, Arendt distinguishes her conception of principles from particular political goals. In *Between Past and Future*, she argues that the general and non-

specific nature of principles is what separates them from the particular and determinate ends of political action. Although an action can manifest a principle in a significant and meaningful way, principles should not be confused with the concrete and particular goals of the action itself. It appears that Arendt seeks to differentiate between the broad and general nature of political values from their embodiment and actualisation in particular political acts. A goal is fixed, definable, and attainable, whereas a principle exists at a higher level of generality and could never be fully realised in any particular political action. However, it is difficult to reconcile this position with her analysis of goals and principles in *The Promise of Politics* in which she offers a different account of their relationship. In this text, goals come to take on a number of the characteristics that in other works Arendt attributes to principles. Arendt (2007, p. 194–5) describes goals as the ‘guidelines and directions by which we orient ourselves’ and the ‘standards by which everything that is done must be judged’. When these texts are considered together it is difficult to avoid the impression of ambiguity in Arendt’s distinction between goals and principles. There is no clear way to make sense of the discrepancy aside from noting that it only concerns her account of goals and in both of these texts the multi-faceted nature of principles appears the same. The account of principles remains more consistent than that of goals across her corpus. Even in *The Promise of Politics* Arendt argues that when a principle is reduced to a mere goal, it loses its character as a constant, habitual and inspiring principle of action and becomes merely a standard of judgment.

The second element of an Arendtian principle is its capacity to act as a non-prescriptive ground of judgment from which political actions can be assessed and evaluated. She argues that principles are ‘the guiding criteria by which all actions in

the public realm are judged beyond the merely negative yardstick of lawfulness' (Arendt, 2007, p. 65). These principles are immanent, which is to say that they are contained within the action itself and are opposed to the imposition of transcendent sources of authority, power and control. It is best to begin with Arendt's own account of this:

What saves the act of beginning from its own arbitrariness is that it carries its own principle within itself, or, to be more precise, that beginning and principle, *principium* and principle, are not only related to each other, but are coeval. The absolute from which the beginning is to derive its own validity and which must save it, as it were, from its inherent arbitrariness is the principle which, together with it, makes its appearance in the world (Arendt, 2006, p. 205).

Political action, which Arendt connects to the idea of a new beginning, contains within it a normative principle as part of its constitutive structure. She views action as being informed by these principles, which arise at the same moment as the performance of the action itself. Political action thus consists in a concomitant co-creation of an objective deed and a principle according to which this deed can be understood and evaluated. The two appear together simultaneously in the public realm in which they can be interpreted and judged. The principle plays a double role as that which can retrospectively be said to have inspired the act and subsequently a standard by which future acts can be compared. For Arendt, such principles are not transcendent norms that form part of an objective and universal metaphysical system. In order to preserve the freedom and spontaneity of action Arendt does not appeal to an external norm against which an action should be judged. The role of the principle, once it has arisen alongside and as a result of the action, is to 'save' it from its potential to deviate from its intended path or to descend into arbitrariness. The



principle can be appealed to as a guideline and parameter for how the action should continue to be carried out and unfold. The fact that the principle arises as part of the action itself means that it is a self-limitation of the action rather than its subsumption under an external norm. As a result of their immanence, Arendt's principles are not eternal laws but historically specific criteria that are attached to and rely upon the actions that brought them into existence. Their immanence to an action places them in a temporal logic of finitude and a specific relationship to the unstable worldly affairs of human beings. The dependence of principles on the continuation of the action that formed them gives them a particularly fragile and tenuous existence: 'the manifestation of principles comes about only through action, they are manifest in the world as long as the action lasts, but no longer' (Arendt, 1968, p. 152). As components of action, principles arise within particular historical moments and in relation to sets of established social practices and norms. For example, in Montesquieu, the principles of honour and virtue provide the evaluative criteria according to which public action within monarchies and republics can be judged. The principle of honour does not act as a law or rule in the prescriptive sense that it would be against the law to act dishonourably, but reference back to this principle provides criteria against which action can be measured.

A third perspective on Arendt's principles is their organisational function as the central values of a political community.<sup>10</sup> Within this context, principles represent the predominant ideals that prevail in the public realm and form of government. These fundamental principles act as a reference point and framework around which other ideas and concepts are organised. Such principles are pervasive throughout the public realm and are valid for 'both the actions of the government and the actions of the

governed' (Arendt, 1994, p. 331). There are a number of crucial places where Arendt (1973, p. 189) describes principles in these terms, such as her reference to the council system as based upon 'a completely different principle of organization' than that of sovereignty.<sup>11</sup> She also names 'public freedom', 'public happiness', 'mutual promise and common deliberation', 'the federal principle' and 'the republican principle' as central organising forces during the American Revolution (Arendt, 2002, pp. 162, 206, 213). Principles become embodied in both the objective institutions of a political community and in the subjective inclinations, dispositions and habits of its citizens. As a principle of organisation, a particular political value becomes persuasive as 'criteria according to which all public life is led' and as a standard that becomes embedded within institutional forms (Arendt, 1994, p. 331). Arendt (1994, p. 332) emphasises this objective dimension of principles by arguing that when principles are no longer heeded 'the political institutions themselves are jeopardized'. They also apply to individuals' conduct in public life. Principles can have a structuring effect insofar as they 'map out certain directions' for acceptable patterns of public conduct (Arendt, 1994, p. 335). Arendt is not referring to people's behaviour in their private lives or the construct of some abstract and hypothetical 'ideal type'. Political principles animate public life, the shared realm in which citizens confront one another as equals and deliberate over common concerns.

Montesquieu understood a form of government to consist of a composition of its structure and animating principle. Arendt's revival of this form of analysis demonstrates that she saw some validity in providing a typology of different forms of government and searching for their unity and structure – an analysis she had already undertaken with totalitarianism.<sup>12</sup> In an application for funding from the Rockefeller

Foundation Arendt states that she would raise again ‘the old question of forms of government, their principles and their modes of action’.<sup>13</sup> In spite of reservations about the nature of Montesquieu’s ‘unsystematic and sometimes even casual observations’, the great benefit of his mode of inquiry is that through remaining attentive to the central animating principle of a government he provides a ‘deep insight into the unity of historical civilizations’ (Arendt, 2007, p. 65). The reference to a spirit or a unity of a people might raise suspicions that Arendt is engaged in a metaphysical analysis of an essence of a government or people. However, Arendt (2007, p. 66) argues that it is precisely in Montesquieu’s ‘less metaphysical’ analysis in comparison to the later uses of ‘spirit’ by Herder and Hegel that proves ‘fruitful for the study of politics’. In contrast to these metaphysical questions, Arendt is engaged in a phenomenological analysis that privileges the experiential character of human existence. She argues that an organising principle can be derived from a ‘fundamental experience’ of a particular form of politics (Arendt, 2007, p. 66). For example, a principle could be based on ‘the experience of equality’, which would find ‘an adequate political expression in republican laws, while love for it, called virtue, inspires actions within republics’ (Arendt, 2007, p. 66). Arendt’s return to Montesquieu and the seemingly anachronistic study of principles is due to its capacity to reveal the fundamental values of a political community and their corresponding conception of politics. However, Arendt does not agree with Montesquieu that the possible number of principles of different forms of government could be reduced to the three he identifies of virtue, honour and fear. She discusses a range of different principles throughout her work and it appears that almost any political value could count as a principle if it was that which inspired an action or organised a political realm.<sup>14</sup> Arendt envisages that a society will have a number of competing principles at

any given time that are debated in the public realm. The question of which principle, or constellation of principles, is currently dominant is a matter for agonistic contestation, deliberation and political judgment. I will return to the question of what form these principles can take following an analysis of their underlying logic.

### **The Relationship between Action and Principles**

In previous interpretations, the full complexity of Arendt's seemingly simple account of the role of principles in political action has not been fully explored. Commentators have offered two main accounts of this role: first, the defence of a straightforward and automatic relationship between principles and actions that fails to thoroughly explore the relationship between the two; or, the proposal that Arendt fails to provide an adequate account of their relationship.<sup>15</sup> With regards to the former position, I argue that since the agent of most *political* acts is a plural subject and because the meaning and consequences of such acts can only be known after the event, the full significance of the act cannot be decided by a solitary acting subject. Rather, it is a matter for political deliberation and interpretation within a political community. Hence, there is no direct or causal relationship between principles and actions as if the meaning of the former could arise directly and unproblematically out of the latter. To assert otherwise would be to overlook the plural, non-determinative and hence free nature of political action. In regards to the latter position, I contend that Arendt does provide a significant and persuasive analysis of the relationship between particular acts and general principles, but this occurs in another place in her work, namely in her *Lectures on Kant's Political Philosophy*. Previous interpreters have failed to observe

how Arendt's principles operate according to her own unique interpretation of the logic of Kant's theory of aesthetic judgment.

Firstly, partly as a result of Arendt's own terminology, her theory of action has occasionally been understood as something committed by a solitary actor. Arendt's account of action in *The Human Condition* has at times been read as akin to a Homeric-inspired deed in which individuals disclose themselves in a public realm through virtuosic performance.<sup>16</sup> Even in *On Revolution* Arendt (2006, p. 205) still occasionally refers to the individual nature of action: for instance, 'the way the beginner starts whatever he intends to do lays down the law of action for those who have joined him in order to partake in the enterprise and to bring about its accomplishment'. However, during this transition period there is a shift in Arendt's understanding of freedom from the 'miracle' of spontaneous new beginnings by individuals, which is manifest in *The Human Condition*, towards the everyday acts of deliberating, persuading and participating in acts of government – a more overtly political concept of freedom. In her later work Arendt is more often concerned with the plural and collective nature of political action. In her lectures on Kant, Arendt (1992b, p. 59) states that 'action ... is never possible in solitude or isolation'. Those acts that count and that are the most important for politics are usually collective acts by an assembled people engaged in a shared political deed. To fail to recognise the plural and collective nature of the subject of action would ignore Arendt's admonishing of Rousseau for having attempted to reduce the plurality of perspectives of the opinions of the many to a unified will, 'one supernatural body driven by one superhuman, irresistible "general will"' (Arendt, 2006, p. 60).

But this acknowledgement is merely to open up the more important and vexing issue of the ambiguous relationship between acts and principles. A criticism that could be made of the way in which this issue has been understood is that, from one perspective, there appears to be an automatic ascription of a principle to an act whereby the act would be the direct manifestation and embodiment of a mediating principle. Arendt (2006, p. 205) has added to this interpretation by stating that an act ‘carries its own principle within itself’. For interpreters such as Knauer (1980, p. 724), actions ‘acquire meaning through their inherent relationship with principles ... [action] *is* its meaning’. Similarly, in an otherwise insightful account of immanent principles, Kalyvas (2008, p. 242) argues that, in relation to action, principles can be ‘extracted ... at the very moment of its [the act’s] performance’ and are ‘dictated by the instituting act itself’. What neither commentator allows for, or at least does not discuss, is a space of openness for these principles to be debated and interpreted. They are too hasty to declare principles the ‘laws of action’, conceding that Arendt ‘never explained how they emerge’ (Kalyvas 2008, p. 247), without analysing how these guiding norms could be deciphered and determined. There can be no simple and direct correlation between action and principles because the interpretation of an action is not a logical operation that can be performed by political actors at the time of its occurrence. Instead, it relies upon the continuing unfolding of a broader narrative of responses, continuations and diversions all related to the initial act. As Benhabib (1996, p. 125) has argued in her influential interpretation of Arendt, human action is embedded within a web of relationships and connections that provide context and meaning to action. Although principles arise alongside action, their full significance can only be known after the event itself because the determination of their meaning must take place within a political community. This is partly because the full

significance of a deed must await the myriad ways in which it will get taken up and continued by others. An action is not simply a stand-alone and singular event but one part of a long chain of actions that may have diverse and possibly unintended consequences. Secondly, the meaning of the act is determined within a political community through open dialogue and agonistic debate. The process of understanding is, as Arendt (1994, p. 322) notes, ‘only the other side’ of action, entwined in a circle of action and reflection in which both activities are mutually reliant on one another. The fundamental convictions of a political community are contestable and continually subject to deliberation and debate. The attribution of meaning to an act and the determination of principles takes place in a political struggle through discussion and persuasion in which a plurality of different perspectives are brought to bear on an action in order to produce a meaningful account of it.

The second issue that has divided interpreters pertains to the logical formula that underlies the relationship between particular political acts and their more general principles. There are two main ways in which the relationship has been conceived, both of which, I propose, are incorrect and miss a number of crucial distinctions Arendt attempts to maintain. Knauer believes that the relationship between principles and actions is a relationship between a universal and a particular. For Knauer (1980, p. 725) principles have ‘universal validity’ insofar as ‘action combines the universality of thought with the particularity of human activity’. He contends that ‘action is a *combination* of the particular, e.g. goals, and the universal, principles of human association’ (Knauer, 1980, p. 725). This interpretation misses Arendt’s critique of universals and her desire to avoid reference to them in a theory of political judgment. But equally problematic is Beiner’s suggestion that Arendt’s account of

judgment entails ‘attending to the particular as a unique happening, irreducible to universals’ in which the task is to ‘pass judgment on the discrete particulars that present themselves on the public stage without bowing to the demands of group ideologies or deferring to the verdict passed by others in society’ (Beiner, 1997, pp. 25, 30). Arendt (1992b, p. 76) considered it inadequate to ‘judge one particular by another particular; in order to determine its worth’. She thought that this would be to succumb to the “melancholy haphazardness” of the particular’ (Arendt, 1968, p. 89). Arendtian political judgment, enacted through immanent principles of action, requires more than the simple appreciation of a particular event *qua* particular, it necessitates an understanding of how particularity stands in relation to, and is exemplary of, a more general principle, which cannot be explicitly formulated or determined as a rule. She seeks to interrupt traditional relationships between particulars and universals by searching for a political logic that refers neither to the subsumption of all forms of particularity under laws of conceptual logic, nor the free play of unadorned particularities. Her answer relies upon a formulation located in her own idiosyncratic reading of Kant’s third Critique.

### **Principles as Exemplary: Kant with Montesquieu**

While Arendt first derives political principles from Montesquieu, it is through Kant that Arendt develops an outline of their political logic and complex relationship to action and judgment. In this section, I first sketch Arendt’s reading of Kant and then clarify how this intersects with Montesquieu’s understanding of the animating principles of a political community.



In her lectures on Kant, Arendt draws from the Kantian vocabulary and framing of the topic of judgment, but in a manner which elucidates an alternative position that is more in line with her own political theory. Arendt's conception of judgment is articulated through a host of Kantian concepts such as 'enlarged mentality', '*sensus communis*', and 'communicability'. However, her interpretations are rarely ones to which Kant would have assented.<sup>17</sup> As a result, it is too hasty of one of Arendt's commentators, Ronald Beiner, to assume that in explicating a number of aspects of Kant's thought Arendt necessarily 'affirms this concept of judgment'.<sup>18</sup> At times she highlights a number of points at which their thought diverges. In other places, she simply ventriloquizes through Kant, but in a voice that is clearly her own, in order to transform Kant's theory from within to suit her own purposes.

In *Between Past and Future*, Arendt places immanent principles in relation to Kant's concepts of the intellect and will:

Action insofar as it is free is neither under the guidance of the intellect nor under the dictate of the will – although it needs both for the execution of any particular goal – but springs from something altogether different which ... I shall call a principle (Arendt, 1968, p. 152).

Arendt makes explicit reference to Kant's faculties of the understanding and reason, prominent in his first and second Critiques respectively, which attempt to subsume instances of particularity under universal laws. In a determining judgment of the understanding, particular empirical intuitions are subsumed under universal concepts in order to produce a representation of an object. In the second Critique, the empirical will of an individual must be brought in line with the universal maxims of reason.

Arendt distinguishes the faculties of the understanding and reason from the operation of principles because she believes that they function according to a different logic. Principles, for Arendt, are more closely related to Kant's analysis of the faculty of judgment and its capacity for judgments of taste. Arendt sees in the judgment of taste an 'analogous problem' to that of the political: an inter-subjective realm that requires criteria through which discrimination and judgment can be communicated without relying on objective laws that would command obedience.<sup>19</sup> Arendt seeks to discover how political action could be appraised through a mode of political thought that would not bind action to a pre-determined set of rules or maxims. In this sense, a principle of an action is *exemplary*: it does not establish a universal law or rule according to which future action could be *determined*, but it does attempt to embody and exemplify a more general standard against which future action could be *judged*.<sup>20</sup>

However, Arendt's understanding of exemplarity is based upon a number of transformations of Kant's philosophy. Firstly, Arendt does not agree with Kant that reflective judgment involves 'thinking of the particular as contained under the universal', which, in a much earlier essay, she argues is for Kant 'the very definition of judgment' (Kant, 2000, p. 66; Arendt, 1994, p. 313). Her move away from this relation between particularity and universality is already apparent in her translation of Kant's *allgemein* as 'general' rather than 'universal'. For Kant (2000, p. 67), in a reflective judgment 'only the particular is given, for which the universal is to be found', whereas for Arendt (1992b, p. 84) in reflective judgments 'one does not subsume a particular under a concept'. Rather, 'the example is the particular that contains in itself, or is supposed to contain, a concept or a general rule' (Arendt, 1992b, p. 84). It cannot attain universal validity but 'exemplary validity', a way 'to

see in the particular what is valid for more than one case' (Arendt, 1992b, p. 85). Judgment for her cannot aspire to the objectivity and universality of logical proof because it is always partial, provisional and relative to human beings. For Arendt (1992b, p. 4), the realm of judgment has 'nothing in common with logical operations'. 'Hence', Arendt (1968, p. 221) states, 'judgment is endowed with a certain specific validity but is never universally valid. Its claims to validity can never extend further than the others in whose place the judging person has put himself for his considerations'. Kant (2000, pp. 99, 121), in contrast, believes that a judgment of taste can attain 'universal validity' by commanding 'a necessity of the assent of *all* to a judgment that is regarded as an example of a universal rule that one cannot produce'. It 'ascribes ... agreement to everyone', it 'expects confirmation' from others as it contains a 'rightful claim to the assent of everyone' (Kant, 2000, pp. 101, 98).

The Kantian conception of the 'necessity' of subjective universality is at odds with Arendt's commitment to pluralism. Rather than opening a space in which actual political subjects could deliberate, it provides the universal grounds of validity for a judgment of an individual subject where no objective criteria are applicable. In Arendt's account, an exemplar is a particular that has no corresponding universal concept by which one could recognise it as a species of that concept. Nor could one achieve an adequate account of a particular political act by comparing it to a number of other similar political acts in the world, stripping back their specificities until one arrives at an abstract schema of an 'act-in-general', which would contain the minimum properties common to all similar acts. Instead, the political act remains a particular that reveals the generality that can in no other way be defined – in the sense, for Arendt (1992b, p. 77), that 'courage is *like* Achilles'.

In place of Kant's concept of subjective universality, Arendt constructs a schema of inter-subjectivity. Whereas Kant's theory is transcendental, Arendt's is phenomenological. Principles are constructed not through a solitary thinker's attempt to establish the autonomous conditions of a judgment of taste, but within the actual judgments of a political community in their assessment of political action. Arendt (1992b, p. 43) differentiates herself from Kant for whom 'the trick of critical thinking' consists not in knowing 'what actually goes on in the mind of all others', since the process of aesthetic judgment 'goes on in isolation'. In a political community, on the other hand, one encounters more than purely disinterested and impartial spectators. It is composed of actor/spectator citizens who must play both roles at different points in the political process. For Kant, the judges of an action 'cannot be a public of actors or participators in government' (Arendt, 1992b, p. 60). It is essentially the reading public that will be the spectators of a political event.<sup>21</sup> For Arendt, on the other hand, active citizens participate in decision-making, deliberate over common affairs and operate in a dual capacity as actor and spectators. It is important for citizens to play both roles because the two are mutually conditioning as the tastes of the spectators begins to be presupposed by the actors who in turn begin to shape and condition the judgments of the spectators (Arendt, 1992, pp. 94–6). The movement away from Kant's disinterested observer is part of Arendt's politicisation of this aspect of his philosophy.

These reflections on Arendt's reading of Kant provide a new perspective from which to view her return to Montesquieu's seemingly antiquated analysis of a 'unity' or a 'spirit' of a people. Arendt (1994, p. 335) praises Montesquieu for having discovered

the ‘miracle of the unities of cultures’ through his notion of principles. Arendt’s language in these passages demonstrates some ambiguity concerning what form principles take and whether they are tied to implausible metaphysical claims. I argue that rather than springing from a metaphysical beyond, Arendt’s principles can be interpreted as a community’s fundamental convictions and shared political orientation. When Arendt speaks of a ‘fundamental experience’ of a political community this need not be viewed as the deep metaphysical ground on which it is based. Arendt (1994, p. 338) explicitly states that principles arise through ‘the self-understanding as well as the self-interpretation of people’. The unity that Arendt has in mind is the identity of a political community, composed of an inter-subjective realm of plural political opinions. She refers to the maintenance of a community’s identity through the preservation of a ‘We’ in its journey through historical time (Arendt, 1992, p. 207). Principles take part in this ongoing narrative through their status as exemplary ideals expressed in particular acts and decisions. The negotiation of this identity addresses the continual need for the articulation and rearticulation of fundamental values that define a political community and assists in the mediation of its recurrent conflicts and transformations. Principles are not laws or rules that are codified and established once and for all. Rather, they result from the continual cycle of action and judgment that constitutes the political realm. As a result, a community’s deep-seated values and beliefs are continually evolving and subject to agonistic contestation and debate.

### **The Transformative Potential of Principles**

Political principles play a distinctive role in Arendt's theory due to the historical relation they establish between past events, the present and most importantly, as I will stress, an open and yet undetermined future. Arendt (2007, p. 195; 1968, p. 151) argues that principles 'come down to us through history' and can be 'repeated time and again' in different historical contexts leading to their regeneration in new political settings. For Arendt (1968, p. 151), principles are general in the sense that they are 'not bound to any particular person or to any particular group'. By returning to hitherto forgotten principles, political actors evoke different ideals and values to those currently dominant in their political realm and attempt to inspire action based on their rearticulation and renewal. Arendt's writings are filled with stories of people who produced radical political transformations through a return to principles. A prominent example is the American revolutionaries who were able to 'change the whole structure of the future world' through a rejuvenation of several interrelated political principles (Arendt, 1992, p. 215). Political transformation in this broad sense involves extraordinary political moments of new foundations or altering the fundamental identity of political regimes. A principle remains dormant while not being practiced in the public realm, but can become a site of transformation if kept alive in historical memory. It is this future-oriented character of principles in Arendt's work that has received insufficient attention in the secondary literature.<sup>22</sup> In this section, I examine how principles not only enable a connection between the present and the evaluative standards of past exemplary actions, but also hold open the potential for future political transformation.

First, the rearticulation of past principles serves a negative or critical function in creating a site of contestation over current values. The invocation of a new principle creates a rupture in the present, which Arendt (1992, p. 205) refers to as a 'hiatus in

the continual flow of temporal sequences'. This challenges established principles and calls into question the central values of a political community. It destabilises the authority of current institutions and practices by denaturalising their universal and commonly accepted status. Second, and relatedly, a return to principles harbours a transformative potential because it opens up a broader perspective of political ideas and initiates new debates on the best form of communal life. In 'Introduction into Politics', Arendt (2007, p. 197) laments the 'narrow horizon of experience left open to us' in the way in which we answer the most important questions of our age due to our neglect of political principles. She underscores the world-expanding nature of principles in their capacity to return to forgotten meanings of politics that no longer animate the public realm. Resuscitating lost principles of the past allows for a radically altered perspective on the present through a new standpoint and set of political values. Without new principles broadening the scope of political debate, Arendt (2006, p. 263) argues it would be possible to 'take for granted that there is not, and never has been, an alternative to the present system'.

Third, Arendt differentiates her own use of principles from the nostalgic remembrance of a former golden age that could be retrieved as a political model for the present. In her view, this relies on a misleading notion of history as the cyclical movement of ages in which a certain past era could be turned to as a model for a future society.<sup>23</sup> Arendt takes aim at Marx for basing his vision of a post-capitalist classless society on the idea of an 'original communism' to which it might be possible to return. In her interpretation of political principles, Arendt proposes a vastly different relationship between past and future. Principles operate within Arendt's particular understanding of history, interpreted as the continual interruption of actions and events rather than a natural or cyclical process. Since the continuity of tradition

has been broken by the phenomenon of totalitarianism, the only way to gain access to the past is through a selective and fragmentary historiography, captured by Walter Benjamin's phrase, 'a tiger's leap into the past' (Benjamin, 1969, p. 261). Arendt's view of history engages with the past, but is also attentive to the promise of the future through the creative and transformative repetition of principles. Political action draws upon principles of the past, but their manifestation in a new political context implies a necessary transformation and reconfiguration.

For example, Arendt argues that the principle of freedom has never appeared since the Greek *polis* with the same clarity. In the *polis*, freedom was the fundamental dimension of human life. The experience of freedom in Athens serves as an exemplar and ideal for future generations (Arendt, 2007, p. 195). However, a return to this principle would not reconnect us with an unbroken tradition by reviving the exact institutions and practices of the Athenians. For Arendt (2007, p. 120), it is not necessarily the 'organizational forms' that should be replicated, as if from a blueprint, but 'certain ideas and concepts' that are partially realised within a political realm. These ideas can be looked back on for inspiration of different ways of practicing politics rather than exact models to be copied. The rearticulation of a principle relies upon a double movement, in which the new political action is both rooted in the past and shapes the future through an act of radical creation. Historical imitation necessarily involves a degree of innovation, which transforms the nature of the principle through its rearticulation. As a result, the renewal of a principle such as political freedom will always be a form of reinvention and transformation.

Political principles embody a tension in Arendt's work between her criticism of the dangers of absolute new beginnings and the need for political action to be



nevertheless free and unconstrained by prior historical sequences. Although conditioned by its historical context and relationship with past struggles, the rearticulation of principles facilitates a new political action that is more than a simple repetition of the past. Unique adaptations of principles can produce novel political actions within a new context and setting. Departing from the largely positive assessment of the American revolutionaries in *On Revolution*, in *The Life of the Mind* Arendt (1992, p. 216) is critical of their tendency of ‘understanding the *new* in terms of an improved re-statement of the old’. Upon returning to ancient prudence to supplement their own experiences of self-government, the Americans decided that the only possibility for them to undertake a new political endeavour was to repeat the primeval founding of Rome anew. Arendt suggests that attending to the importance of principles might open an alternative pathway that does not rely on the recreation of mythical foundations or the view that new action will simply be a return to the past. To avoid this impasse, Arendt (1992, p. 216) suggests a ‘tentative alternative’, the only one that she believes would escape the search for a lost golden age. For Arendt (1992, p. 216), it is Augustine who stands alone as the thinker who could have underpinned what she describes as a ‘truly Roman or Virgilian philosophy of politics’. From Augustine’s philosophy, Arendt draws the lesson that human beings are capable of new beginnings based on the fact of natality – the entrance of new human beings into the time continuum of the world. Thus, for Arendt, the possibility of a return to principles and new political action is underwritten by the fact that new human beings are continually being born into the world. Although Arendt only briefly touches upon this point, it reveals the essential connection between principles and the capacity for free political action to begin unpredicted chains of events.<sup>24</sup> The rejuvenation of principles facilitates political action as an unexpected beginning which is able to ‘break with the commonly accepted and reach into the extraordinary’

(Arendt, 1998, p. 205). It enables political transformation through a reconfiguration of past actions and the adaption of principles to contemporary political circumstances.

## **Conclusion**

Arendt (2007, p. 197) is disheartened that ‘the question as to the principles of action no longer informs our thinking about politics’. In contemporary political discourse we are accustomed to privileging the exigencies of daily political struggles in the media cycle over the contemplation of action’s connection with deeper political principles. Reflection on principles provides a deeper basis and ground orientation for political action in the long-standing values of a community and its reflections on human existence. Arendt (2007, p. 196) speaks of the possibility of action ‘arising out of the many possible well springs of human community and nourishing itself from those depths’. Instead of basing action on an immediate response to emerging problems, Arendt contends that it should spring from and be guided by broader principles that would provide standards and orientation. In this article, I have expanded upon the various overlapping dimensions of Arendt’s understanding of political principles. Principles offer a degree of stability and continuity in their ability to put forth basic criteria that arise internal to the performance of an action, against which future endeavours can be judged and guided. Arendt combines aspects of the philosophies of Kant and Montesquieu in a novel interpretation to show how principles arise alongside action and are exemplified by particular political acts without determining them in advance or establishing a universal law. In the final section, I argued that

principles can be continually called upon and returned to as a source of inspiration and guidance for new political beginnings and future political transformation.

One of the most significant historical reference points in Arendt's discussion of principles is the experience of the American Revolution and its debt to antiquity. Importantly for Arendt, the American revolutionaries' return to ancient principles presents a double lesson, which may serve as a concluding reflection. Firstly, the success of the American Revolution was in part due to the revolutionaries' 'study of Greek and Roman authors' from whom they learned the 'inspiring principles' of 'public or political freedom and public or political happiness' (Arendt, 2006, pp. 114–5). They began to speak of the *res publica*, translating it into the eighteenth century language of the realm of public affairs. The principle of public freedom and participation in politics 'prepared the minds' of the revolutionaries and made possible political acts 'for which they had no previous inclinations' (Arendt, 2006, p. 115). A return to forgotten principles inspired the revolutionaries to transform their political realm and found a new republic. However, the same principles that inspired the revolution found it very difficult to flourish in the new regime without lasting institutions to nourish and preserve them. The failure of the revolutionaries to create an institution of democratic participation such as the council system reveals that principles must be preserved in the institutions and practices of a political community in order to withstand change. Arendt (2006, p. 117) considers that 'this second task of revolution, to assure the survival of the spirit out of which the act of foundation sprung, *to realize the principle which inspired it*' was ultimately left unfulfilled. What is unfortunate, then, is a principles' susceptibility to being forgotten, either through the failure of its preservation in political thought or its lack of appropriate

institutionalisation. The existence of political principles holds open the ever-present potential for transformation. However, this also means that without their conservation in cultural artefacts, political concepts and lasting institutions they will remain forever vulnerable.

## References

- Arendt, H. (1968) *Between Past and Future*. New York: Penguin Books.
- Arendt, H. (1973) *Crises of the Republic*. New York: Pelican Books.
- Arendt, H. (1992) *Life of the Mind*. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich.
- Arendt, H. (1992b) *Lectures on Kant's Political Philosophy*. ed. R. Beiner. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.
- Arendt, H. (1994) *Essays in Understanding*. ed. J. Kohn. New York: Schocken Books.
- Arendt, H. (1998) *The Human Condition*. 2nd ed. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Arendt, H. (2004) *The Origins of Totalitarianism*. rev. ed. New York: Schocken Books.
- Arendt, H. (2006) *On Revolution*. New York: Penguin.
- Arendt, H. (2007) *The Promise of Politics*. New York: Schocken Books.
- Beiner, R. (1997) 'Rereading Hannah Arendt's Kant Lectures', *Philosophy & Social Criticism*, 23 (1), 21–32.
- Benhabib, S. (1996) *The Reluctant Modernism of Hannah Arendt*. London: SAGE Publications.
- Benjamin, W. (1969) *Illuminations*. ed. H. Arendt. New York: Schocken Books.
- Cane, L. (2015) 'Hannah Arendt on the principles of political action', *European Journal of Political Theory*, 14 (1), 55–75.
- Cane, L. (2015b) 'Arendt on Principles, the Right to Have Rights, and Democracy: Response to Näsström', *Political Theory*, 43 (2), 242–8.
- Canovan, M. (1992) *Hannah Arendt: A Reinterpretation of her Political Thought*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Ferrara, A. (2008) *The Force of the Example: Explorations in the Paradigm of Judgment*. New York: Columbia University Press.

- Gottsegen, M. G. (1994) *The Political Thought of Hannah Arendt*. New York: SUNY Press.
- Ingram, D. (1997) 'Novus Ordo Seclorum: The Trial of (Post) Modernity or the Tale of Two Revolutions', in *Hannah Arendt Twenty Years Later*, eds. L. May and J. Kohn. Cambridge: MIT Press. 232–45.
- Kalyvas, A. (2008) *Democracy and the Politics of the Extraordinary*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Kant, I. (2000) *Critique of the Power of Judgment*. ed. P. Guyer. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Knauer, J. T. (1980) 'Motive and Goal in Hannah Arendt's Concept of Political Action', *The American Political Science Review*, 74 (3), 721–33.
- Kateb, G. (1984) *Hannah Arendt: Politics, Conscience, Evil*. Totowa, N.J.: Rowman & Allanheld.
- Marshall, D. L. (2010) 'The Origin and Character of Hannah Arendt's Theory of Judgment', *Political Theory*, 38 (3), 367–93.
- Montesquieu, Baron de, (2002 [1748]) *The Spirit of Laws*. New York: Prometheus Books.
- Näsström, S. (2014) 'The Right to Have Rights: Democratic Not Political', *Political Theory*, 42 (5), 543–68.
- Vatter, M. (2014) *The Republic of the Living: Biopolitics and the Critique of Civil Society*. New York: Fordham University Press.
- Villa, D. (1992) 'Beyond Good and Evil: Arendt, Nietzsche, and the Aestheticization of Political Action', *Political Theory*, 20 (2), 274–308.

---

<sup>1</sup> For previous discussions of Arendt's principles see Knauer, 1980, pp. 724–6; Kateb, 1984, pp. 12–3; Canovan, 1992, pp. 171–5; Gottsegen, 1994, pp. 33–9; Ingram, 1997, pp. 232–45; Kalyvas, 2008, pp. 241–53; Näsström, 2014, pp. 543–68; Cane, 2015, pp. 55–75; Cane, 2015b, pp. 242–8.

<sup>2</sup> Kalyvas and Ingram turn to Habermas in an attempt to 'complete' or 'revise' Arendt's analyses. For a critique of a Habermasian reading of Arendt see Villa, 1992.

<sup>3</sup> See also her discussion of principles in 'Introduction into Politics': 'the question as to the principles of action no longer informs out thinking about politics, at least not since the question as to which polities and forms of government represent the best of human communal life has fallen silent'. Arendt, 2007, p. 197.

<sup>4</sup> The main analyses of principles in Arendt's work: Arendt, 1968, pp. 151–4; 1973, pp. 52, 76, 189–91; 1992, pp. 199–216; 1994, pp. 331–8; 1998, pp. 190–1, 237–8; 2004, pp. ix, 460–79; 2006, pp. 79, 114–7, 162–5, 177, 204–6, 212–3, 237–8, 258–64; 2007, pp. 63–6, 192–200.

<sup>5</sup> See Cane, 2015, 2015b; Näsström, 2014.

<sup>6</sup> See also Arendt, 1998, pp. 190–1.

<sup>7</sup> See also Arendt, 1994, pp. 331–5.

<sup>8</sup> Arendt offers a slightly different formulation in 'Introduction into Politics', differentiating between an action's ends, goals, motives and principles.

<sup>9</sup> Arendt, 1992b, p. 65.

---

<sup>10</sup> Contra Näsström I argue Arendt was attentive to the ways in which political principles engendered specific forms of government. See Näsström, 2014, p. 3.

<sup>11</sup> For other references to the organising power of principles see Arendt, 1973, p. 76; 1994, pp. 331–8; 1998, p. 237; 2006, pp. 213, 262; 2007, pp. 65, 120;

<sup>12</sup> Arendt, 2004, p. 461. Elsewhere Arendt states that ‘there is hardly an event of any importance in our recent history that would not fit into the scheme of Montesquieu’s apprehensions’. Arendt, 1994, p. 329.

<sup>13</sup> Letter to the Rockefeller Foundation, quoted in Arendt, 2007, p. xvii.

<sup>14</sup> For example ‘such principles are honor or glory, love or equality, ... or distinction or excellence’. Arendt, 1968, p. 152. Arendt also states that Montesquieu’s enumeration of principles is ‘of course pitifully inadequate to the rich diversity of human beings living together on the earth’. Arendt, 1992, p. 202.

<sup>15</sup> For the first problem see Knauer, 1980, pp. 724–6. For the second see Kalyvas, 2008, pp. 241–53.

<sup>16</sup> Arendt, 1998, pp. 175–180. However, even in *The Human Condition* Arendt emphasises that to be isolated from others is to be deprived of one’s power to act.

<sup>17</sup> For a more thorough appraisal of Arendt’s relationship to Kant and the debates concerning her conception of judgment see Marshall, 2010.

<sup>18</sup> Beiner, ‘Interpretive Essay’, in Arendt, 1992b, p. 124.

<sup>19</sup> She states that whereas ‘the validity of the statement  $2 + 2 = 4$  is independent of the human condition’ and true regardless of our relationship to it, the capacity of judgment ‘presupposes a common world into which we all fit’ and an open space ‘in-between’ where the significance of particular events could be discussed. Arendt, 1994, p. 318.

<sup>20</sup> On the broader exemplary role of political ideas and institutions see Ferrara, 2008.

<sup>21</sup> Here Arendt refers to Kant’s political writings rather than his theory of aesthetic judgment.

<sup>22</sup> The notable exception to this is Lucy Cane’s excellent analysis of the repetition and regeneration of principles. See Cane, 2015.

<sup>23</sup> See her discussion of Marx and Nietzsche in Arendt, 1992, p. 215.

<sup>24</sup> For a more thorough engagement with Arendt’s conception of natality see Vatter, 2014.